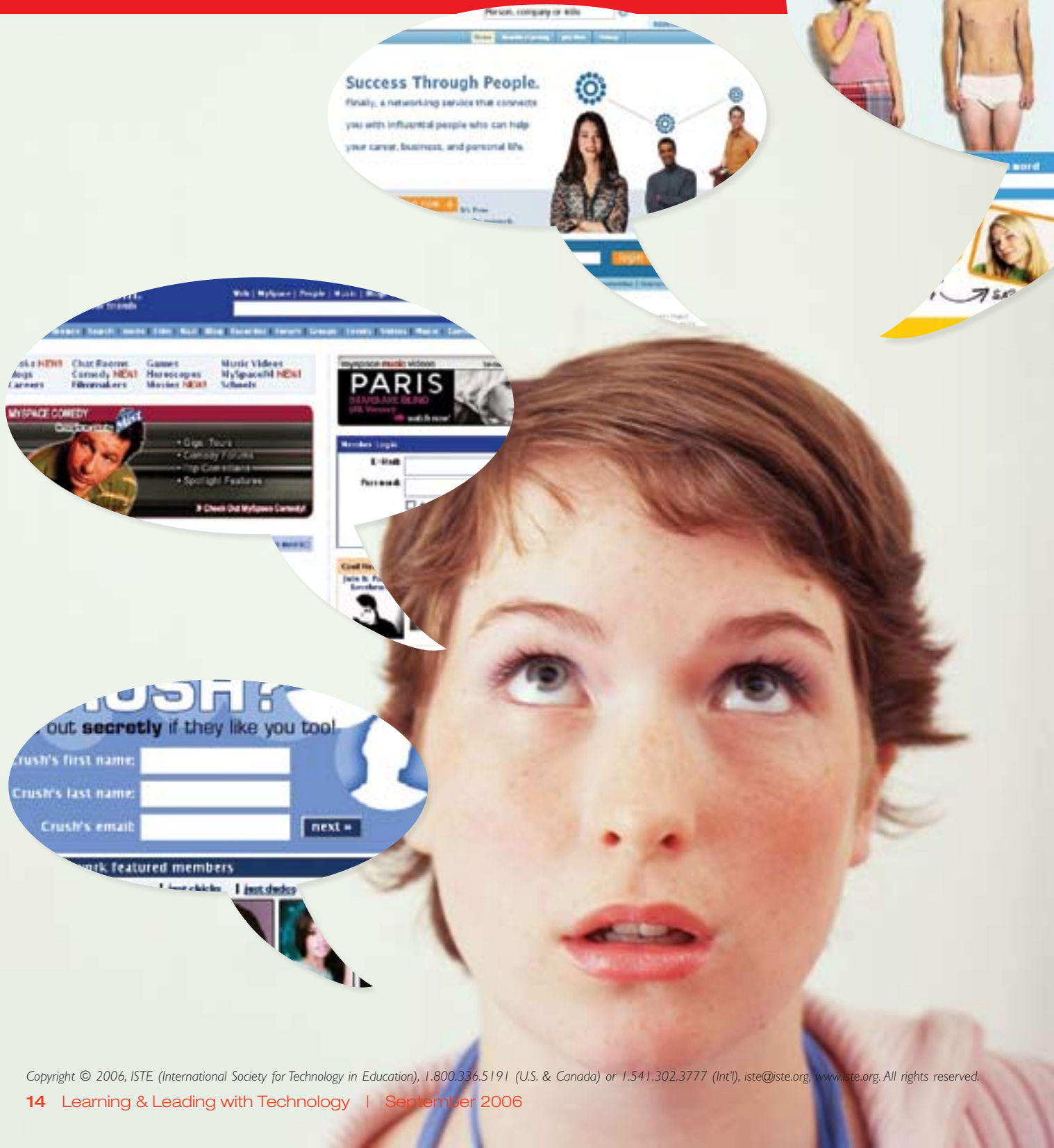


# MY SPACE OR YOURS?

Social networking is causing a stir on campuses. With millions of K-12 students actively participating in these online social clubs, educators need to be aware of the issues and concerns being raised.



With nearly 2 million new MySpace accounts created every week and a user base that may be pushing 90 million, social networking is an established Web phenomenon.



**S**ocial networking sites have been expanding rapidly since 2003. Friendster opened to the public in March 2003 and initially expanded membership at a rate of 20% a week. Friendster made a big splash because of its unprecedented access to the coveted 25–35-year-old demographic. Since then, many big Web players have started up social networking sites.

Although Friendster enjoyed an initial membership explosion, many users seemed to get bored with the technology and move on to other things. It was MySpace, which was created for musicians as a place to showcase their music, that seems to have weathered the initial boom. With nearly 2 million new MySpace accounts created every week and a user base that may be pushing 90 million, social networking is an established Web phenomenon.

The social networking sites that now seem to be most successful (in terms of large memberships) are those that have been created around a central theme and maintain a sort of voyeuristic appeal.

My first exposure to social networking sites was a newspaper article that talked about how students at George Washington University were changing

their social habits. When meeting someone, students would run back to their computers to check out the new person according to what they could find on Facebook.

Facebook is the brain child of a college student, Mark Zuckerberg. Where Facebook has been successful is that it has been one of the first sites to explicitly base its online community on the physical campus. Last year, Facebook made itself available to high school users. Facebook continued to make headlines last school year as high school students throughout the United States joined. At a recent meeting of our area tech coordinators, Facebook was the one topic that everyone seemed to have in common.

One of the facets of social networking sites is the ability of members to join groups. Facebook members can set up special clubs, which were intended as a way for users to exhibit their personalities. Although this

aspect may have good intentions, it has backfired and mushroomed into a source of cyber bullying and harassment. It is rather ironic that what was developed as a tool for students to connect and share ideas and be good netizens has evolved into a place that can be so powerfully negative and hurtful.



Of course, social networking does not have to be used in a negative way. Although these applications may be the key to seeking employment in the future, our newest challenge will be to figure out how to teach our students to use them in responsible and respectful ways. I guess that there's a useful purpose to someone's curriculum, but I'm hard-pressed to see it yet for the noise and ruckus it has created upon its arrival.

## SOCIAL NETWORKING PERSPECTIVE

By J.V. Bolkan

**A**ny new technology, especially those attractive to students, poses an element of risk. From repetitive motion injury, retarded social growth, and radiation alerts, to pedophiles lurking in the technology shadows, there are and continue to be real problems related to technology. However, many of these problems were first associated with technologies almost no one questions today. Some may be only slightly related to technology in reality.

The current loud and sometimes raucous debate on the topic of social networking sites isn't really different from previous menaces such as electronic calculators, television, e-mail, video games (and their cousins, edutainment titles). Real and imagined problems, reported anecdotally, almost always push defenders of technology into a hard-to-argue position. No one wants any child to be accosted by a predator.

*Social Networking continued on p. 16.*

**It is relatively easy for minors to create accounts on these networks. Even more troubling, adults can just as easily masquerade as teens on the networks catering to them.**

Another important consideration is that of safety. Social networking Web sites require membership for access. Creating an account can require potential members to share personal information including but not limited to names, screen names, e-mail addresses, passwords, snail mail addresses, phone numbers, age, sex, and occasionally even income information. Many of the sites designed for adults indicate that fact clearly and require a birth date for account creation. However, checking the legitimacy of this information is virtually impossible, so it is relatively easy for minors to create accounts on these networks. Even more troubling, adults can just as easily masquerade as teens on the networks catering to them.

Although we continue to spread our message about protecting personal information, Facebook held an appeal that no previous social site had hit upon. It struck a chord with our students when they heard it was designed and implemented at Harvard. Our students perceived Facebook as something used at all the best colleges. Like a wildfire, our students joined the

Recent crime figures from the FBI show an increase in “online predator” arrests, with 1,649 made in the United States last year. Shocking and dismaying without a doubt. However, they attribute much of the rise in arrests to heightened awareness and more aggressive prosecution. Furthermore, there were more than 65,000 estimated arrests of sexual predators last year. That is nearly 40 predators who are not using technology to go after our students for every “high tech” creep who is. And of course, no one can know how many victims of online predators would have engaged in dangerous meetings without the Internet.

The most obvious sign that the debate is somewhat overheated is that few rational voices are pointing out that actively online students may actually be safer from predators than their more naïve classmates. According to a Pew Internet and American Life Project study released in December 2005, “Bloggers, and to a lesser extent teens who read blogs, are Internet omnivores who explore, play with, utilize and generally inhabit the Internet with a greater abandon than their less blog-savvy counterparts.” That same study estimates the number of 12–17-year old bloggers at more than 4 million.

Undoubtedly, educators must take every opportunity to stress the dangers students face in the world today. At the same time, technology isn’t the biggest danger. Youngsters are vulnerable, they always have been. Demonizing social networks won’t end sexual assaults on juveniles, it just takes one potentially powerful tool out of educators’ toolboxes.

—J.V. Bolkan is the senior editor for L&L.

site, posted their pictures, and started collecting friends and getting in on the action.

Social worth on networking sites is often identified not only by who you are friends with but by how many friends you obtain. Students were joining the networks of friends in their school and other schools as well.

Once we have personal information on the line, we have security worries.

When Facebook hit our school, I contacted a friend at the Maryland state police to ask about the safety of these types of Web sites. At our school, we go through great efforts to teach our students about the dangers of giving out personal information. In addition to classroom instruction, we include visits from law enforcement and other guest speakers who are knowledgeable about Internet safety.

Even after all of our educational efforts, Facebook lulled our students into a false sense of security by claiming that access was limited to other students. The site requires an e-mail

## WHAT IS SOCIAL NETWORKING?

What exactly is social networking? One of the latest technology catch phrases, social networking, is also one of the latest trends to evolve out of the growing online community.

Social networking sites gather data submitted by members that is then stored as user profiles. The data or profiles can then be shared among the members of the site. Membership can be free or fee-based. For many of these sites, a user can gain membership by the simple act of setting up an account. A typical social networking site provides members with a Web page or blog where they can post text, photos, and other content for visitors to view. Just like clubs in our traditional society, some are open to all and others are accessed by invitation only. Many social networking sites can be divided into basic categories including business, common interest, and dating sites.

**Like a wildfire, our students joined the site, posted their pictures, and started collecting friends and getting in on the action.**



## Some Popular Social Networking Sites

Descriptions of these sites are taken directly from the sites themselves. With the rapid rise and demise cycle of these type of sites, this should not be considered a comprehensive list.

### ConnectU

<http://www.ConnectU.com>

A free online community that connects people through networks of friends and common interests at more than 100 different colleges and universities.

### eCrush.com

<http://www.ecrush.com>

A secret admirer match making site with love quizzes, dating advice, and more.

### Facebook

<http://www.facebook.com>

An online directory that connects people through social networks.

### Friendster

<http://www.friendster.com>

An online community that connects people through networks of friends for dating or making new friends.

### FriendSurfer.com

<http://www.friendsurfer.com>

A six-degrees-of-separation social networking experiment. Hook up with old friends and meet new ones.

### Friendzy

<http://www.friendzy.com>

No matter what or how strange your interests, Friendzy helps you connect with people just like you—or not like you.

### GlobeAlive

<http://www.globealive.com>

The first search engine to list live people as search results. Hundreds of experts, business owners, and conversationalists are standing by to converse with you by chat or offline messaging on all topics from computers to cooking.

### gradFinder

<http://www.gradfinder.com>

A site for finding classmates.

### The Impersonals

<http://impersonals.com>

We couldn't find a personals site we weren't embarrassed to join, so we made our own.

### LinkedIn

<http://www.linkedin.com>

LinkedIn is an online network of more than 6 million experienced professionals from around the world, representing 130 industries.

### MeetUp

<http://www.meetup.com>

Helps people find others who share their interest or cause, and form lasting, influential, local community groups that regularly meet face to face.

**We will still pursue teaching them that if they choose these resources, they need to remember that not only will their friends be looking at them, but their parents, teachers, college admission, and future employers will as well.**



address that it can verify by the school's domain name. This was attractive and seemed very safe to our students; however the police verified that the sites were not hacker proof and that predators would be able to masquerade and gain access.

Although Facebook claims to have verification of membership, they are not checking with the school, they are only validating an e-mail address. Our testing revealed that we could set up accounts for our school mascot and accounts that had been set up for the purpose of students delivering homework.

For some really good, concise information for students, parents, and educators about Internet safety, and

specifically blog, diary, and profile sites, visit [www.wiredsafety.org](http://www.wiredsafety.org).

Ultimately, to combat the Facebook frenzy at our school, we had to block access from our network to the social networking sites that were most commonly used. This was a total reversal of our previous policies. With other technologies, I have held the belief

that filtering is not a good thing. Hackers and predators can always find ways to break through. Indeed, many see it as a personal challenge.

Social networking sites have taken us, as educators, outside of our comfort zone. Like all other new technologies, we need to explore how we can continue to educate students about

### MySpace

<http://www.Myspace.com>

An online community that lets you meet your friends' friends.

### Netplaya

<http://netplaya.com>

A free place on the Web for the Burning Man community to connect and interact with burning man enthusiasts worldwide.

### Orkut

<http://www.Orkut.com>

An online community that connects people through a network of trusted friends.

### PeepsNation

<http://peepsnation.com>

Enables users to connect with others with a similar interest that meet your filter criteria using user-definable groups tied to a specific location.

### Ryze

<http://Ryze.com>

Helps you expand your business network.

### Schoolster

<http://www.schoolster.com>

Helps people connect and stay in contact with high school and college friends within an online community.

### Studentcenter

<http://www.student.com>

A Web community for college students, high school students, and teens.

### Tickle

<http://web.tickle.com>

A teen-oriented portal site with networking (dating emphasis) and dozens of quizzes targeted at teen females.

### Tribe

<http://Tribe.net>

We believe in the power of connecting to other people to get things done. We founded tribe.net to make it easier. Whether it's for finding the right job, a killer apartment, a good restaurant, a gentle dentist, or a hiking buddy.

### Xanga

<http://www.xanga.com>

A community of online journals and diaries.

### ZeroDegrees

<http://zerodegrees.com>

A networking service that connects you with influential people who can help your career, business, and personal life.

how to use these sites wisely. Blocking them from our school networks, and encouraging our students not to use them certainly has brought a shift to our thinking. The future of cellular networks will bring more challenges to our classrooms. Remember the first picture phones and the headlines of students taking pictures of tests and sending them to their friends? Teaching safety about sites that aren't accessible on our school resources seems counter-intuitive for teachable moments. However, we will still pursue teaching them that if they choose these resources, they need to remember that not only will their friends be looking at them, but their parents, teachers, college admission, and

future employers will as well. Curricula for Internet safety now need to include the risks and benefits of placing personal information and images online for the world to see.

### Resources

Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use:

<http://www.cyberbully.org>

Electronic Frontier Foundation: <http://www.eff.org>

Wired Safety: <http://www.wiredsafety.org>



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Academy in Sarasota, Florida.

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